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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 005482

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: GARCI'S RETURN TO THE PHILIPPINES: WILL IT BRING CLOSURE?

REF: A. MANILA 5364

[B.](#) MANILA 4140

[C.](#) MANILA 2970

[D.](#) MANILA 2777

[E.](#) MANILA 2738

Classified By: A/Political Counselor Paul O'Friel for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Former Commission on Elections (COMELEC) Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano's reappearance in the Philippines after almost four months overseas has sent ripples through political circles and led to speculation and rumors about the timing and purpose of his return. Both the pro-Arroyo and Opposition camps are seeking to use Garcillano's return and his potential testimony to their own advantage, i.e., to refute or confirm the allegations of electoral fraud dogging Arroyo. Barring any explosive new revelations from Garcillano, however, the Opposition is unlikely to be able to recharge its efforts to impeach Arroyo. Most Filipinos are tired of this year's political bickering and want to see politicians focus on domestic issues important to their day-to-day lives. The most likely outcome is that Garcillano's testimony will bring closure to the controversy, even if Arroyo's image remains irreparably tarnished in the public eye. End Summary.

The Return: Background

¶12. (U) Garcillano's wife Grace and at least three members of the House of Representatives confirmed in the media this week reports that he had returned to the Philippines, on or around November 18. Garcillano is the election official with whom President Arroyo spoke in a taped -- and subsequently leaked -- telephone conversation last year, leading to Opposition accusations of electoral fraud and calls for her resignation.

After the wiretapped recording surfaced in June, Garcillano allegedly ignores subpoenas served on him by the House of Representatives. On July 14, Garcillano was reported to be in Singapore, and he remained overseas for over four months (first in London, and later in a Latin American country, according to media reports). He was cited for contempt of Congress and an arrest order was issued on August 3 by five House committees jointly investigating the case.

¶13. (U) In a brief national address on June 27, President Arroyo admitted that it was her voice on a taped conversation with an election official -- whom she did not name -- last year, but denied any intent to influence the outcome of the May 2004 election (ref c).

Reactions: Rumor and Speculation

¶14. (U) Garcillano's return (he is reported to be at his home in the northern Mindanao province of Bukidnon) has created a stir in political circles in the country and led to a flurry of speculation and rumor. As soon as Garcillano's return to the country became known, members of the Opposition asked that he be allowed to come forward to testify -- in order to prove allegations that the May 2004 presidential election was rigged. Pro-Arroyo politicians, including Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago agree that Garcillano should be given the chance to respond publicly to the allegations without fear of prosecution.

¶15. (SBU) Other Opposition leaders claim that Garcillano is back to deliver a Malacanang-scripted exoneration of Arroyo and her administration of the accusations of electoral fraud, and instead implicate Opposition figures in electoral fraud. Leading Opposition figure Senator Panfilo Lacson has said that Garcillano would testify to this effect when he makes his first public re-appearance, and has called for Garcillano's immediate arrest in order to "protect" him from pressure from Malacanang. Lacson has further alleged that the House leadership's reorganization two days ago of the five committees jointly investigating the "Hello Garci" issue (as it is popularly known) is part of this script. On the night of Wednesday, November 23, the five chairmen of these committees were replaced by congressmen who are viewed as more "friendly" toward President Arroyo. The timing of this move has been construed by some as a reaction to the reported

imminent reemergence of Garcillano. Sources close to Garcillano say he might make his first public appearance early next week.

Administration Shrugs Off the News

16. (SBU) Garcillano's return may reflect Malacanang's confidence that the "Hello, Garci" audiotape scandal is essentially behind Arroyo now and that his return will put the final nail in the coffin of that controversy. (Note: There have been reports that persons connected to the Arroyo administration helped Garcillano return to the Philippines. The Bureau of Immigration has no record of Garcillano reentering the country, and there is speculation that he reentered the country by boat from Sabah, Malaysia. End Note.) However, it also offers the Opposition an opportunity to reopen the issue, after its impeachment effort was decisively quashed in the House of Representatives on September 6 (ref b). The pro-Arroyo camp appears to believe otherwise: President Arroyo is silent on the issue, Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye has said that the public is tired of

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the controversy, and Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources (and close presidential advisor) Michael Defensor has called it a "dead issue."

Comment

17. (C) Whatever might emerge from Garcillano's potential public testimony, Filipinos in general are tired of the political bickering that has been going on since June and want to see their politicians focusing on other, more practical issues like the economy and unemployment (see ref a). They are hoping that this will put an end to the controversy, barring any damning testimony by Garcillano. If the issue is finally laid to rest, it is possible that we will see a renewed and clearer focus by Arroyo on domestic reform issues, which should allow us to pursue our bilateral agenda more effectively.

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